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Office of Linda Lingle

Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle receives a briefing from Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski on the balcony of his office on May 18.

For Jewish governor of Hawaii, going to Israel feels like coming home

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON, June 9 (JTA) — The governor of Hawaii noticed something familiar when she stepped onto Israeli soil for the first time last month.

“We’re both isolated,” said Linda Lingle, the Jewish Republican governor of the Aloha State. “We’re isolated by water; they’re isolated by unfriendly neighbors.”

Beyond that similarity, both states have economies that are highly dependent on tourism and have been working in recent years to move into technology.

Those are some of the reasons Lingle jumped at the opportunity to visit Israel, where she promoted an agricultural cooperative agreement between Hawaii and the Jewish state. She also met with senior political leaders, including Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and got a taste of the political and economic climate in Israel.

In a telephone interview last week with JTA, Lingle said she gained a better understanding of the need for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and erect a security barrier in the West Bank.

She said one of the things she really didn’t understand about Israel before the trip was that so much of the land in the country is government-owned. Also, she anticipated kibbutz life to be more widespread.

Lingle was born in St. Louis and raised in Southern California before moving to Hawaii after graduating college.

Her visit in May took her to the Negev Desert, where she discussed higher education issues with the president of Ben-Gurion University, as well as to a

Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, where she learned how victims of terrorism are treated.

Lingle said she found Israelis very supportive of the role the Bush administration has been playing in the Middle East.

"I think they value very much America's friendship and want it to continue," she said.

As one of few prominent Jewish Republicans, Lingle says she hopes to play a role in garnering Jewish support for President Bush's re-election in November.

Lingle already has touted Bush to Jewish audiences in Los Angeles. She says she hopes to do it more. Republican officials are hoping the same of her, but there may be logistical problems given that Lingle is two time zones away from Los Angeles.

Facing a re-election battle in 2006 in a largely Democratic state, Jewish Republicans said she ought to reach out to the larger Jewish community this election year to help gain financial strength for her own battle ahead.

As for November 2004, Lingle said it's important for Jewish voters to know that Bush does not make Middle East-related decisions based on the views of European leaders or domestic public opinion polls.

"The shift over to President Bush is related to his strong support for the State of Israel," she said.

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